

A Firmer than Usual Handshake

Mike Hartley

Rain on the windscreen, waterlogged fields and Kingsdale Beck in spate; it wasn't a good day to be underground.

The plan was to do a pull-through trip in Swinsto Hole. A pull-through is just that, start at the top, work your way through the system pulling the abseil rope down off each pitch behind you. Pulling through is a nice way to cave as it requires minimal gear and it's downhill all the way. The downside to pulling the rope down is that it guarantees total commitment; after the first pull there's no way back!

Swinsto Hole is a Grade 4 trip, popular and well-bolted with abseil anchors. In very wet weather this system takes a lot of water so the Master Cave and the final exit passageway, called the Valley Entrance, can flood to the roof. Because of the flood risk it is normal practice to check the water levels in these two areas before starting the trip, therefore checking your exit route before you begin.

The Valley Entrance passage was knee deep in places and the stream running through the Master Cave didn't look too deep. There was a rope in place from the rock-bridge down to the stream for the final climb up.

Our recce complete, we retraced our steps, only about ten minutes, and, reassured that our exit would be clear, we set off up the hillside to find the cave entrance. The forecast, for a dry morning and light rain in the afternoon, didn't seem to bear any resemblance to what was actually happening; the weather seemed to have worsened by the time we got there.

John got kitted up inside the cave entrance, out of the rain. I stayed outside; much wetter but not requiring any physical contortions in the confined space, anyway I had a feeling I might get wet soon.

I don't have a lot of experience of really wet caving but it seemed to me there was a lot of water going down the first pitch. As soon as we pulled the rope down it suddenly felt a lot more serious and I knew we were fully committed.

Swinsto's Long Crawl was, well, long and wet; wetter than I was expecting. We had brought three 30-metre ropes, expecting to use only one on most pitches, but having the option to tie two together on a long pitch and still have a spare 'just in case'.

We decided to split the 'Split Pitch'. By now the water was really thundering down and it was difficult to hold a conversation due to the noise. Then, just when we didn't need it, the rope jammed. Jumarring back up to free it would have been possible, but time-consuming and dangerous due to the volume of water, so in the absence of any volunteers we thanked our lucky stars we had brought a spare and abandoned it. I shudder to think what would have happened if we hadn't got that spare with us!

I watched John go down the next pitch, at least I did until he disappeared completely in the waterfall. I could see his lamp glowing dimly in the brown floodwater. When my turn came, I found it wasn't actually as



Adrian Pilling starting one of the abseils; on the day in question the water would have been chest high.

Photo Mike Hartley

bad as it looked; most of the way I could bridge out and avoid the full force of the water. Eventually though, it was necessary to step into the middle of the fall; surprisingly I slipped straight through to the other side into a slight alcove, therefore avoiding the full force for all but a few seconds. Soon we were in the Great Aven, almost at the Simpsons Junction, just one more pitch and we would be on our way to the Master Cave.

I now started worrying about the time; I'd given my wife a call-out time of 5pm and knew we might be late. A stressful situation made worse by worrying about the time; made worse by worrying about my wife worrying about the time!

The next and final pitch was a raging brown torrent. I watched anxiously as John disappeared under the water again. I could see the glow of his lamp; he seemed to be taking ages. I was sure he must be down but the rope was still taught, I couldn't believe he was taking so long. I had an awful feeling we were going to have a disaster! Then I saw him stagger clear and shout; I couldn't tell what he said but the rope was slack and he seemed OK. I looked over the edge at the gushing water, the foam and the spray sparkling in my lamp light. I didn't want to do this, but I knew there was no choice and we were nearly there; nearly in the sanctuary of the Master Cave. OK; check the Petzl Stop, take a deep breath and get going. I couldn't believe the power of the water when I touched down; I could hardly stand up, I couldn't see anything except the white blur of my light reflecting off the water, all I could hear was an incessant screaming in my ears. I couldn't tell which way to go to escape the force of the water, the rope in the stop preventing me from moving quickly. After what seemed ages tugging at the stop and staggering about amongst a jumble of boulders, I sensed the water pressure had lessened and I was at the edge of the fall. Then a hand on my shoulder and John shouting 'are you OK Mike?'

John had had an equally bad time, we were now both feeling a bit anxious not to mention tired and battered; we just needed to keep calm and keep moving.

Last time I was in the Master Cave it was a pleasant stroll in just a few inches of water. Looking at the brown river now racing down the streamway I knew it would be no easy stroll today and it looked nothing like a sanctuary! I remembered the guy leading that trip pointing to the bolted escape-route in the roof and saying: 'If it's flooding and the chips are down you can climb along there.'

The river was far too fast and deep to wade, and too wide to jump without extreme risk. So here we were; 'the chips were down' and we had no option but to climb the high-level escape-route.

The bolts are placed so that a rope can be rigged bolt to bolt to facilitate rescue, we couldn't rig like this as we didn't have lots of spare krabs, having done a pull-through. It would have been possible to thread or tie the rope through every bolt, but it would have taken ages and time now felt very pressing. We climbed, clipping in with cows' tails, sometimes on poor footholds but usually with good handholds. Some of the spaces between the bolts were such that it

was necessary to unclip both cows' tails, and make a move, before being near enough to the next bolt to clip in again. Not a good time to slip! Fortunately, John has done plenty of climbing and I've done many bolted aid-climbs, including the roofs of Thor's Cave, Peak Cavern and Kilnsey, so this didn't feel unduly difficult, but for a caver without some climbing experience and without the means to rig a rope to each bolt or extend cows' tails, this may prove to be a very difficult and daunting exercise. The high-level escape-route, unless fully rigged, is NOT a walk in the park!

After a while the bolts along the right-hand wall appeared to run out and it seemed obvious to cross the streamway to much easier looking terrain on the other side. This was easier said than done; it was too far to jump and anyway the consequences of falling in the river didn't bear thinking about, as just around the corner the river disappears into a sump; certain death the only outcome. We threaded a rope through a bolt and John lowered himself into the water, a short distance downstream; the current pushed



Adrian Pilling in the Master Cave streamway in 'normal' conditions. The water would have been above head height on our trip.

Photo Mike Hartley

him across to the far side where he could climb out onto a shelf. Both safely across we searched in vain for the continuation of the bolts, only to find they were, annoyingly, back over on the other side, hidden, just around a corner from where we had just come from!

The thought of reversing this procedure was not appealing; we had used the current to push us over to this side, it certainly wouldn't push us back again! It seemed best to simply hold on to the rope, find the best jumping point and go for it. Fortunately, the side we were on was slightly higher than the side we were jumping to. Unfortunately, the landing was sloping and slippery, so with a sort of lurching, jumping scabble we were over and back on route. Soon we were at the aerial high-wire crossing the streamway from right to left.

Crossing the flooding Master Cave on the Tyrolean traverse was atmospheric but safe, and technically quite easy, and if it wasn't for the nagging feeling that we might miss our call-out time I would have enjoyed it.

The bolts continued on the left-hand wall, just under roof level and cross some very steep terrain for a few moves; vertical rock, poor footholds and spaced bolts. We were both now tired, mentally as well as physically, and suffering from a certain amount of adrenaline deficiency, so it was a relief to see the rock-bridge and the start of the final passage to the valley entrance.

It was only ten minutes from here but the water in the passage was much deeper now. It may have been my imagination, but the ceiling seemed to be getting lower and the water getting deeper the further we went. At every corner, I expected John to turn around and say: 'That's it, it's sumped.' Then would come the crushing disappointment and the realisation that we were stuck!

At last we pushed the bags up the entrance tube onto a dark and rain-lashed hillside. Ten minutes to call-out; a joint sigh of relief! An adventure we'd never forget, and a firmer than usual handshake!